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Public sector motivational practices and their effect on job satisfaction: country differences

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of job satisfaction practices for public sector employees through a cross-national approach.

Design/methodology/approach – A multi-group analysis was carried out using SmartPLS3 among non-teaching employees of public universities in Poland and Spain.

Findings – The results show a positive relationship between motivational factors and job satisfaction; however, there is no evidence that the variable “country” introduced significant differences.

Originality/value – The research findings contribute to a better understanding of job satisfaction for public employees and provide empirical evidence on the relationship between job satisfaction and public culture.

Keywords Public sector, Job satisfaction, Multi-group analysis, Cross-country research, Public service provision

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

To meet the demands of today's society, the strategic goals of public sector organisations (PSOs) have progressed from merely looking for efficient and effective service provision to truly providing public service, based on the theoretical framework of public service dominant logic theory (PSDL) (Osborne, 2010; Osborne *et al.*, 2012). Among the innovations developed by PSDL, one is the acknowledgement of the role of public employees as internal customers (Azêdo and Alves, 2013; Hiedemann *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, PSOs must encourage those human resource management (HRM) practices that positively affect the motivation and satisfaction of their human capital, which in turn will lead to better performance (Hung, 2012; Vandenabeele, 2009). The term “motivation” in this paper does not refer to the public sector motivation theory (Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry, 1997) but to the concept of an “individual's degree of willingness to exert and maintain an effort towards organizational goals” (Franco *et al.*, 2002, p. 1). Job satisfaction is considered as “a positive (or negative) evaluative judgment one makes about one's job or job situation” (Weiss, 2002, p. 175). Subsequently, considering public employees as internal customers implies tailoring their motivation and satisfaction policies to their specific circumstances.

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A country's cultural values could influence the perceptions of job satisfaction and its determinants, so public employees from different cultures may display different levels of job satisfaction, although the literature is inconclusive on this topic. Indeed, the phenomenon of globalisation and the wave of reforms in which PSOs all over the world are currently engaged have caused a worldwide interest in how to improve public service provision by enhancing public employees' job satisfaction. Nonetheless, there is little research regarding how HRM practices affect public employees' job satisfaction in a cross-national context, which might be useful to develop a universal construct.

The following questions therefore arise: How should public managers motivate their internal customers? Does the use of specific human resource practices have a different effect on the job satisfaction of public sector employees under a cross-national perspective? Are these practices universal, implying that public sector culture is stronger than country culture and public managers can learn from other similar institutions in other countries? This study addresses these questions using a survey among the non-teaching staff of public universities in Poland and Spain. The data analysis is conducted using SmartPLS3, which fits small samples, and through a multi-group analysis. The results provide empirical information useful to policy makers interested in formulating a HR policy that caters to their employees' needs and promotes satisfaction.

Literature review and hypotheses

According to McPhee and Townsend (1992, p. 117), job satisfaction is "a positive emotional state resulting from the perception of one's job as fulfilling or allowing the fulfilment of one's important job values, providing these values are compatible with one's physical and psychological needs". Job satisfaction may also refer to the degree to which job needs are fulfilled and the extent to which the employee perceives that fulfilment (Porter, 1962; Rich *et al.*, 2010). In other words, job satisfaction is a combination of what employees feel about their job and what they think about the various aspects of their job (Locke, 1976).

Many antecedents or determinants influence job satisfaction. Herzberg *et al.* (1959) differentiate between motivators or intrinsic aspects of the job and hygiene factors or extrinsic aspects of the job. In addition, some authors add a third type of determinant regarding relationships at work (Drabe *et al.*, 2015; Pelit *et al.*, 2011) following the perspective of the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations. These interactions are usually interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person.

Based on reciprocity, employees develop exchange relationships with their managers and the organisation. SET posits that there are certain HRM practices and cultural values such as fairness, opportunities for personal growth, enthusiasm for the job and good reputation that significantly affect public employees' motivation and attitude (Bellou, 2010; Gould-Williams, 2016). In addition, perceived organisational support (POS) and perceived managerial support (PSS) influence these interactions (Rakowska *et al.*, 2015).

Perceived support and perceived organisational justice as determinants of job satisfaction. Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) define POS as the employees' perception that the organisation values them and their welfare. POS assumes that, when employees perceive support from their organisations, they reciprocate by working hard to improve organisational effectiveness (Brunetto *et al.*, 2013). In turn, this behaviour fulfils employees' social needs (Kurtessis *et al.*, 2015), enhancing their job satisfaction (Malhan, 2006), organisational commitment (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002), and organisational citizenship behaviour (Tekleab and Chiaburu, 2011), as well as causing a reduction in turnover intentions also for public sector employees (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2003; Kim and Stoner, 2008).

Regarding PSS, extant research confirms that managerial support affects exchanges between managers and subordinates (Wayne *et al.*, 1997), helps employees deal with their

job requirements (Bakker *et al.*, 2004), and builds confidence in the decisions of the leader (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Trust in relationships between superiors and subordinates creates a climate that improves job engagement and satisfaction (Ellinger *et al.*, 2010; Podsakoff *et al.*, 1996), even for public sector employees from different countries (Kim, 2014):

H1. Perceived organisational and managerial support have a positive effect on the job satisfaction of public employees.

Employees' feelings and behaviour in their work environment depend also on their perception of organisational justice and fairness (Inoue *et al.*, 2010), which affect engagement, job performance, and job satisfaction (Inoue *et al.*, 2010; Rayton and Yalabik, 2014; Saks, 2006). Perceived organisational justice refers to honesty and fairness perceived in the job environment (Greenberg, 1990; 2011; Price and Mueller, 1986; Moorman, 1991). The feelings of fairness and distributive justice have their roots in Adams' equity theory regarding employees' concerns regarding the distribution of outcomes and resources (Adams, 1965). As Cohen-Chara's (2011) meta-analysis confirms, both dimensions are quite intertwined. Chen *et al.* (2015) studied the role of perception of organisational justice in PSOs, evidencing its relation to administrative performance appraisal and organisational commitment.

Many authors emphasise that it is not the HR practices themselves but the way they are perceived what significantly influences employee behaviour (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016). In this context, perception of support from the organisation and managers, as well perception of organisational justice and fairness should influence public employees' job satisfaction:

H2. Perceived organisational justice and fairness positively influence public employees' job satisfaction.

Rewards as determinants of job satisfaction. As it was mentioned before, Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg *et al.*, 1959) affirms that job satisfaction's determinants may involve extrinsic rewards (e.g. monetary compensations, job security, or promotions), and intrinsic rewards (e.g. respect from colleagues, training and development opportunities, or challenging work assignments) (Coomber and Barriball, 2007; King, 1970; Saks, 2006). Specifically, Jun *et al.* (2006) state that participation in training programs had a positive effect on the employees' level of self-confidence, being happier with their organisation, and report that rewards and recognition are key in enhancing employees' job satisfaction.

Although previous research states that studies on job satisfaction among private sector employees cannot be applicable to public employees due to their different reward systems (DeSantis and Durst, 1996), public managers should not neglect extrinsic and intrinsic factors' influence on job satisfaction (Gerhart and Fang, 2014; Mottaz, 1985; Maidani, 1991; Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza, 2000; Sanjeev and Surya, 2016). In any case, intrinsic rewards are more effective in PSOs (Bullock *et al.*, 2015; Crewson, 1997; Cowley and Smith, 2014). In the same vein, Judge *et al.* (2010) state that the level of compensation has only a slight effect on the level of employee satisfaction, becoming even a detriment in some cases (Deci, 1975):

H3. Intrinsic rewards will affect the job satisfaction of public employees.

H4. Extrinsic rewards will affect the job satisfaction of public employees.

Effects of country culture on job satisfaction. Considering public employees as internal customers implies tailoring motivation and satisfaction policies to their specific circumstances to improve effectiveness. National culture has been deemed a significant influence on the behaviour of private sector employees (Drabe *et al.*, 2015; Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza, 2000) and public sector employees

(Bouckaert, 2007; Gerhart and Fang, 2014; Rufin *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the effect of the same HRM policies should be different for the public employees from different countries (Brunetto *et al.*, 2013; Chordiya *et al.*, 2017; Hu, 2014; Huang and Van de Vliert, 2003; Liden *et al.*, 2014; Matheson and Kwon, 2003).

Although studies confirm national culture's role on employee behaviour, a number of researchers (Christensen and Lægheid, 2007; Milne, 2007; Vandenabeele and Van de Walle, 2008) argue that the bureaucratic nature of PSOs influences the attitudes and interests of public employees. Podger (2017) posits that the drivers of a strategic approach to public HRM are similar across countries. For that reason, specific motivational practices for public employees could have similar effects on job satisfaction regardless of the country of application. Still, Franco *et al.*'s (2002) theoretical research on motivation for public employees shows that while organisational factors (mainly structure and culture) directly affect the results of HRM policies, the broader cultural framework will also influence said organisational culture and the way employees and clients relate in the process of public service provision. The question, then, is if national culture prevails over other factors such as a bureaucratic organisational culture:

H5. The relationship between job satisfaction and its determinants will vary across countries.

Method

Administration personnel from two universities, one in Poland and one in Spain, answered a standardized quantitative survey (translated from English to the respective languages) about job satisfaction, perceived justice, perceived support and preferred rewards. The control variables were age, gender, and studies. This research was performed in two similarly sized public institutions (in number of students and personnel), with bureaucratic structures.

The data comprises 171 responses, 72 from the Spanish institution and 99 from the Polish one, from employees working in purely clerical positions belonging to the technocratic part of the organisation. The low response rate owes to the adverse feelings towards answering a questionnaire for somebody in their working place, especially considering previous situations that led to negative repercussions as a result of climate surveys, and despite the strong assurances for anonymity. The data set had only three missing values, which were replaced by the mean value since they did not have a systematic pattern and any imputation method should work (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In addition, two questionnaires were invalidated. Harman's (1976) single factor test indicated that it is unlikely that the results may be affected by common method variance (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). As we can see, both samples are quite similar, as shown in Table I. Both groups are markedly feminine staff, most of them belonging to the generation X and well educated. Therefore, no sample particularities may alter the interpretation of the results.

SmartPLS 3.0 (Ringle *et al.*, 2015) was used to compute the model and the multi-group analysis (PLS-MGA). The PLS approach is useful and convenient when dealing with small samples in terms of robustness and statistical power (Reinartz *et al.*, 2009; Hair *et al.* 2013), particularly in management research (Hair *et al.*, 2012, 2013). A composite-based method was preferred to a factor-based method for the sake of robustness (Rigdon, 2012).

All the constructs were based on reflective items (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2008) using Likert scales (from 1 to 5). The items for each construct were obtained and adapted from the literature, where possible, to comply with content validity (Table II). Some items had to be depurated for the model to be valid.

Results and discussion

In the end, the model resulted in five working constructs: job satisfaction, perceived justice, perceived support (encompassing POS and PSS), intrinsic rewards, and extrinsic rewards.

	Group 1: Spain		Group 2: Poland		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>						
Total	72	42.1	99	57.9	<i>n</i>	169
Male	23	31.9	20	20.2	43	25.1
Female	48	66.7	77	77.8	125	73.1
<i>Age</i>						
< 34 (Gen Y)	2	2.8	34	34.3	36	21.1
> 35- < 49 (Gen X)	44	61.1	46	46.5	90	52.6
> 50- > 65 (Gen BB)	26	36.1	18	18.2	44	25.7
<i>Education</i>						
Secondary school	15	20.8	14	14.1	29	17.0
Bachelor degree	22	30.6	7	7.1	29	17.0
MA/Msc	32	44.4	74	74.7	106	62.0
PhD	3	4.2	3	3.0	6	3.5

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Table I.
Sample characteristics

	Mean	SD	Loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE	References (adapted)
Job satisfaction (JS)	3.85	0.91		0.83	0.90	0.75	Saks (2006)
All in all, I am satisfied with my job	3.917	0.957	0.92				
In general, I don't like my job (Reversed)	3.714	1.171	0.74				
In general, I like working here	3.929	1.000	0.92				
Perceived Justice and fairness (PJ)	3.16	0.933		0.86	0.90	0.64	Price and Mueller (1986), Greenberg (1990), Moorman (1991)
Job decisions are made by the manager in a biased manner (Reversed)	3.375	1.213	0.81				
To make job decisions, managers collect accurate and complete information	3.266	1.085	0.82				
All job decisions are applied consistently to all affected employees	3.089	1.140	0.72				
The outcomes I receive reflect the effort I have put into my work	3.190	1.220	0.82				
My work schedule is fair	3.167	1.194	0.82				
Perceived support (PS)	3.34	0.97		0.93	0.95	0.71	Eisenberger <i>et al.</i> (1986) (short version), Eisenberger <i>et al.</i> (2002)
I feel that my organisation really cares for my personal aims and values	2.905	1.065	0.80				
I feel that my organisation creates an environment where I can perform best	3.166	1.075	0.85				
Help is available from my organisation when I have a problem	3.337	1.161	0.80				
My supervisor really cares for my personal aims and values	3.320	1.179	0.84				
My supervisor creates an environment where I can perform best	3.420	1.164	0.87				
I can trust my boss to back me up on decisions I make at work	3.589	1.156	0.86				
My manager is supportive of my ideas and ways of getting things done	3.613	1.195	0.89				
Extrinsic rewards (ER)	2.65	1.08		0.73	0.84	0.64	Saks (2006)
A pay raise	2.238	1.390	0.74				
A promotion	2.290	1.247	0.84				
More freedom and opportunities	2.864	1.120	0.83				

Table II.
Constructs/indicators

(continued)

Table II.

	Mean	SD	Loadings	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE	References (adapted)
Intrinsic rewards (IR)	3.25	0.95		0.80	0.87	0.62	Saks (2006)
Respect from the people you work with	3.805	1.163	0.78				
Praise from your supervisor	3.268	1.399	0.83				
Training and development opportunities	3.290	1.228	0.76				
More challenging work assignments	3.036	1.305	0.78				

According to Coomber and Barriball (2007), job satisfaction can be studied as a whole concept (global approach) or focussing on specific areas (facet approach). This study uses the global approach and a multi-item construct (Saks, 2006) because of the many positions under analysis.

Table II describes the final constructs. Although PSS and POS were to be considered separately, the model showed a better fit when combining all the support-related items in one construct, even though all PSS items present higher mean values than the POS items. This concurs because POS influences the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship, and therefore the PSS (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002; Wayne *et al.*, 1997). Regarding the items of the perceived justice and fairness construct, Table II shows that unbiased job decisions have the highest mean value, whereas the lowest mean value belongs to having all job decisions consistently applied to all affected employees. Among the intrinsic rewards, public employees seem to prefer the perception of respect from their colleagues, whereas having more challenging work assignments comes in last place. As for the extrinsic rewards, Table II also confirms that pay rises are less valued than other rewards and compensations.

All constructs comply with the reliability indicator (outer loadings > 0.7), internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.7$; composite reliability > 0.8), and convergent validity (AVE > 0.5) (Table II). Discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell-Larker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) as shown in Table III.

The PLS algorithm computed a model, after 300 iterations, which was later used as a basis for the multi-group analysis. This model fit criteria are $R^2 = 0.50$ (acceptable), adjusted $R^2 = 0.49$ (acceptable), SRMR = 0.08 (valid), and NFI = 0.78. The path coefficients and their significance are shown in Table IV.

The assessment of the results states that perceived support, perceived justice, and intrinsic rewards have significant positive effects over public employees in general. Most of the

	JS	PJ	PS	ERW	IRW
JS	0.86				
PJ	0.63	0.80			
PS	0.66	0.82	0.84		
ERW	0.44	0.41	0.44	0.80	
IRW	0.60	0.58	0.68	0.54	0.79

Table III.
Discriminant validity

Table IV.
Path coefficients and
PLS-MGA results:
Country effect
(Bootstrapping 5000
iterations)

Original sample	M	SD	<i>t</i> -statistics	Path coefficients		<i>t</i> -values (Poland)	<i>t</i> -values (Spain)	Path coefficients abs. difference	Interval coefficients			
				(Poland)	(Spain)				2.5% (Poland)	97.5% (Poland)	2.5% (Spain)	97.5% (Spain)
PJ → JS	0.24	0.24	0.09	0.15	0.29	1.22	1.85	0.14	-0.11	0.37	-0.03	0.58
PS → JS	0.27	0.27	0.10	0.35	0.10	2.79**	0.53	0.25	0.09	0.59	-0.26	0.45
ERW → JS	0.11	0.05	0.11	0.19	-0.16	1.45	0.84	0.35	-0.06	0.44	-0.43	0.21
IRW → JS	0.22	0.22	0.08	0.15	0.29	1.25	2.34*	0.14	-0.10	0.36	0.06	0.54

Notes: **p*-value < 0.05; ***p*-value < 0.01

parameters have similar weights, except for the path coefficient of extrinsic rewards, which is not significant. Therefore, *H1*, *H2*, and *H4* are accepted. The rejection of *H3* concurs with the literature stating that intrinsic rewards prevail over extrinsic rewards in PSOs (Bullock *et al.*, 2015; Crewson, 1997; Cowley and Smith, 2014).

The next step is the multi-group analysis. Table IV also presents the results of the non-parametric test for the multi-group analysis, following Hair *et al.*'s (2017) recommendations to overcome the limitations of the parametric test. None of the differences of the coefficients is significant. Therefore, there are no country effects on job satisfaction according to this model, thus failing to support *H5*.

Keeping these findings in mind, we can describe the country models to understand the characteristics of each group's samples. The R^2 for the Polish group model is 0.55, and for the Spanish group it is 0.43 (*t*-value of the difference: 1.19, *p*-value: 0.23, confirming the lack of country effect). The results in Table IV suggest that, as with the general model, extrinsic rewards do not have a significant direct effect over the job satisfaction of the respondents of both countries. However, the rest of the parameters display different behaviours: Polish respondents only show a direct, positive effect of perceived support on their job satisfaction, whereas Spanish respondents express a significant, direct effect of intrinsic rewards. The depth of the public budget cuts in Spain might explain this result.

To analyse if other variables could be affecting this relationship, we use socio-demographic control variables (gender, age, and educational level) for moderating effects, using PLS-MGA. Table V indicates that gender, age, and educational level do not make a difference either. These results do not concur with Bellou (2010), Drabe *et al.* (2015), or Sanjeev and Surya (2016), respectively. This is a matter for further investigation.

Conclusions, limitations, and future lines of research

Considering public employees as actors of the value determination process is still an innovative concept in the public sector research. The nature of PSDL implicates the involvement in the provision of public services of professionals and users. However, while the latter are often subject of research, the role of public employees as internal customers has received little attention. Its relevance increases if we take into account the current hostile environment for PSOs, which in turn may affect their performance because of unsatisfied employees not contributing to the creation of public value.

When looking at the determinants of job satisfaction for public employees, few studies provide cross-country analysis, and no consensus exists on the effect of those determinants, as with monetary rewards. The results of this study show that public managers should be aware of the motivating force of intrinsic rewards and of the lack of significant drive of extrinsic rewards, particularly money-related ones. Furthermore, the surveyed employees do not perceive a significant difference between the effects of managerial and institutional support. Bureaucracy, norms, and rules limit the behaviour of managers, who must behave "following

	Gender		Education			Age	
	Male- Female	Secondary- Bachelor	Bachelor- Master	Secondary- Master	Gen Y- Gen X	Gen Y-Gen BB	Gen X-Gen BB
PJ → JS	0.06	0.33	0.03	0.30	0.43	0.47	0.04
PS → JS	0.04	0.61	0.30	0.31	0.01	0.10	0.11
ERW → JS	0.31	0.36	0.16	0.52	0.22	0.13	0.09
IRW → JS	0.20	0.01	0.04	0.05	0.44	0.31	0.13

Notes: **p*-value < 0.05; ***p*-value < 0.01

Table V.
PLS-MGA results:
Path coefficients
differences (in
absolute value);
gender, education,
and age effect
(Bootstrapping
5000 iterations)

the letter of the law” and have limited decision power. Finally, public HRM could introduce innovative practices to increase the perception of justice and fairness of procedures as a way to increase employees’ satisfaction.

The results show no overall significant country differences. Public service identity seemingly weights more in determining public employees’ job satisfaction than country specifics, endorsing the universal aspect of the bureaucratic culture overriding country effects (Podger, 2017). The socio-demographic elements have also proved insignificant sources of change, reaffirming the strength of the bureaucratic culture over other parameters. Likewise, the joint construct “perceived support” reinforces the lack of country effects in favour of the bureaucratic culture effect. Therefore, public managers could learn and adapt other PSOs’ practices to increase their own performance. To evaluate the consistency of these findings, future research could replicate this study in significantly culturally different countries and using a broader assortment of PSOs. A qualitative study could also enrich these quantitative findings.

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